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Moderate realist ideology critique

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Abstract

Realist ideology critique (RIC) is a strand of political realism recently developed in response to concerns that realism is biased toward the status quo. RIC aims to debunk an individual's belief that a social institution is legitimate by revealing that the belief is *caused* by that very same institution. Despite its growing prominence, RIC has received little critical attention. In this article, I buck this trend. First, I improve on contemporary accounts of RIC by clarifying its status and the role of motivated reasoning. Second, I show that realist ideology critics face a dilemma: either their account makes deeply implausible epistemological assumptions, or they temper its epistemology at the expense of rendering it toothless. I argue for each horn in turn before revealing the dilemma to be a false one by making a novel distinction between varying strengths of RIC based on their underlying epistemological assumptions. I propose Moderate RIC as a solution: upon discovering that one reason for your belief that a social institution is legitimate is likely malignantly epistemically circular, the belief should undergo further epistemic testing. I respond to three potential objections and suggest that Moderate RIC would make a fruitful addition to political theorists' methodological toolkit.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The recent turn toward political realism in Anglophone political theory (Galston, 2010; Geuss, 2008; Rossi & Sleat, 2014; Williams, 2008) has given rise to concerns about its alleged bias toward the status quo (Finlayson, 2017;

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Markell, 2010; Philp, 2012); as Lorna Finlayson scathingly proclaimed, “with radicals like these, who needs conservatives?” (Finlayson, 2017). Radical realism has recently been developed in response to this accusation (Aytac & Rossi, 2022; Brinn, 2020; Cross, 2022; Kreutz, 2023; Prinz & Raekstad, 2020; Raekstad, 2021; Rossi, 2019; Rossi & Argenton, 2021). One dominant strand of radical realism, closely tied with the work of Enzo Rossi, offers a purely epistemic form of ideology critique (Aytac & Rossi, 2022; Prinz & Rossi, 2017; Rossi, 2019; Rossi 2024; Rossi & Argenton, 2021). I follow Matt Sleat in referring to this as *realist ideology critique* (Sleat, forthcoming), which shall form the focus of this article.

Realist ideology critique (henceforth, RIC) seeks to problematize beliefs in support of a social order that are also caused by that same social order. In a nutshell, it operationalizes the motto “might does not make right.” Despite its growing prominence, RIC has received surprisingly little critical attention.¹ I buck this trend and propose my own variant, *Moderate RIC*, which avoids the two pitfalls of an implausible epistemology and toothlessness found in other accounts of RIC. According to Moderate RIC, when you discover that one reason for your belief that a social institution is legitimate is likely to have been caused by that very institution, this can rob you of other reasons for your belief; as a result, the belief should be subjected to further epistemic testing.

In this article, I have four aims. First, I will try to improve on contemporary accounts of RIC. Second, contrary to recent scholarship on RIC, I will differentiate between varying strengths of RIC based on their underlying epistemological assumptions. This adds clarity to existing debates about RIC and enables other theorists to propose their own preferred variant of RIC. Third, I will argue that Moderate RIC is the best construal of RIC and respond to three potential objections, namely that it is trivial, self-defeating, and insufficient for political theorizing. Fourth, I will suggest that RIC must be supplemented with a considerable amount of normative theorizing in any division of labor between these two methodological approaches.

This article proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I explain the basic mechanics behind RIC, and refine the account in Section 3. Sections 4 and 5 address a dilemma faced by realist ideology critics. I show this to be a false one by distinguishing between different strengths of RIC, before arguing in favor of what I call *Moderate RIC*. In Section 6, I outline and respond to three further objections to RIC. In Section 7, I discuss what a division of labor between RIC and normative political theory might look like. Section 8 concludes by suggesting that Moderate RIC could become a fruitful part of political theorists' methodological toolkit.

2 | WHAT IS REALIST IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE?

RIC aims to debunk beliefs² by revealing that they are caused by the very social institutions that they legitimate (see Figure 1). Such beliefs are dubbed epistemically “suspect,” “distorted,” or “suspicious” (Rossi, 2019) on the grounds that “social orders cannot be genuinely legitimized by circular narratives where hierarchal power relations generate their own acceptance” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 10). RIC is a close cousin of Bernard Williams' Critical Theory Principle, which holds that “the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified” (Williams, 2008, p. 6).³

To explain how a social institution can cause individuals to believe in its legitimacy, Enzo Rossi and Ugur Aytac supplement the account by appealing to motivated reasoning and social hierarchy. Imagine two social groups, A and B, who live in a hierarchical social order S, where A is much more powerful than, and has power over, B.⁴ Let LEG refer to the view that S is legitimate. Members of A may plausibly come to believe that LEG due to motivated rather than sound reasoning. The social hierarchy enables this belief to then be disseminated to members of B without the use of explicit coercion and makes it harder for the belief to be contested (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 6). I show this visually in Figure 2; when Aytac and Rossi invoke “motivated reasoning,” they are giving a causal explanation for (i); when they invoke “hierarchy,” they are giving a causal explanation for (iii).

An immediate worry one might have is that RIC falls foul of the genetic fallacy, which occurs when the critic “takes information about the source of a claim to be relevant to its truth or falsity simply because it is about the

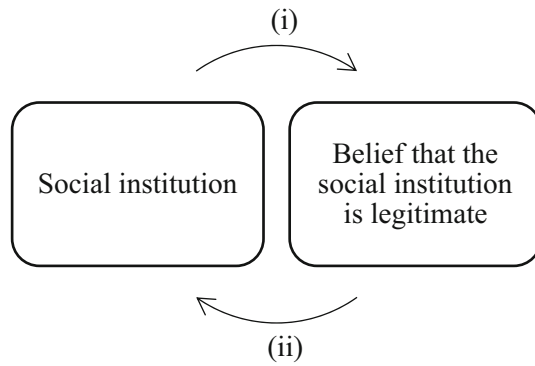


FIGURE 1

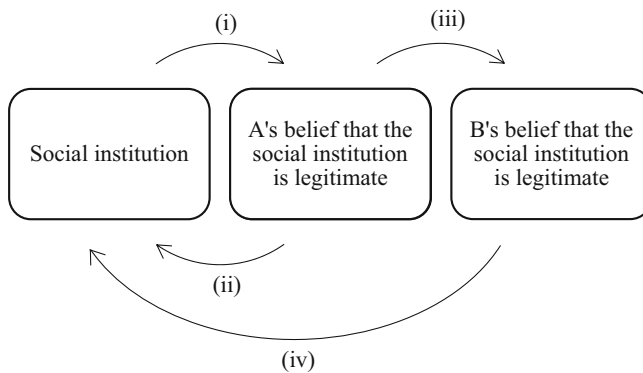


FIGURE 2

source of the claim” (Crouch, 1993, 239). To avoid the genetic fallacy, realist ideology critics emphasize that RIC is concerned with the *justification* rather than the veracity of beliefs. To this end, Rossi and his coauthors repeatedly use the analogy of referee reporting (Aytac & Rossi, 2022; Rossi, 2019; Rossi, 2024; Rossi & Argenton, 2021). According to Aytac and Rossi, “a journal editor would be epistemically reckless if they knowingly used a referee report written by this author about her own work” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 5); elsewhere, Rossi and Argenton clarify that “this is not a point about the intrinsic quality of the report; it is a procedural point about the causal history of the report making it epistemically suspect” (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1055). Most recently, Rossi explains that “the underlying epistemology here is reliabilist: self-referring just isn’t a procedure that tends to yield accurate or trustworthy results” (Rossi, 2024, p. 18).

To show how RIC works in practice, I will outline two recent examples in the literature. First, Rossi and Argenton undertake a RIC of Nozickian defenses of the capitalist state which appeal to “commonsense” intuitions about individuals’ natural rights to private property (Rossi & Argenton, 2021). According to Rossi and Argenton, capitalist states have historically pursued policies to make property “more legible, manageable, and most importantly taxable” (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1051). For example, in the early 18th century, the English state oversaw the “legal conceptualization of land as collateral and debt as saleable property,” and “European colonialism was the principal cause for the spread of this radical simplification of ownership titles and notions of property to the rest of the world” (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1051). These policies shifted popular understandings of property from collectively-owned to individually owned. Given this, they contend that,

Libertarians cannot use the intuitive appeal of private property entitlements in their defense of the capitalist state, because the historical record shows that widespread belief in the central political relevance of those commitments is the causal product of the very coercive order the belief is meant to support. One could have formed that belief in some other way; but given the empirical evidence in support of the state as the proximate cause, the burden is on the libertarian to show that the belief is warranted by other considerations.

(Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1054)

Second, Aytac and Rossi carry out a RIC of neopatriarchy, a social order observed in much of the Middle-East and North-Africa that is “modelled on the analogy between father and ruler” and is characterized by “state-reinforced submission of women to men” and “power asymmetries between the youth and elderly” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 9). Drawing on social scientific research, Aytac and Rossi argue that in neopatriarchal social orders, “state power is used to reinforce existing gender roles and intra-family relations of authority” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 10). This occurs, for instance, through conservative family laws and the political exclusion of feminist demands. These norms encourage “obedient behaviour with respect to authority figures”; in this way, the resulting “cultural reproduction of patriarchal norms within the family is essential for the stability and legitimation of the social order” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 10). Thus, pro-patriarchal beliefs in neopatriarchal social orders are both causally traceable to state actions and used to legitimize the authority of the state. Consequently, Aytac and Rossi conclude that there is an “epistemic circularity generated in the neopatriarchal family,” and that “if one wants to legitimize neopatriarchy or any other social order, one needs to find some other noncircular argument” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, pp. 10, 11).

3 | REFINING RIC

In this section, I aim to refine contemporary accounts of RIC in two ways. First, I will clarify the status of RIC as a heuristic device. Second, I will suggest that the tight link that realist ideology critics often draw between motivated reasoning and RIC should be loosened. I will incorporate these two insights in the subsequent discussion and my proposed variant of RIC, which I will set out in Section 5.

I first want to consider the status of RIC as a form of critique. As Sleat rightly notes, one cannot draw a direct causal link from the fact that your belief that *p* serves your interest to the conclusion that your belief that *p* was formed via motivated reasoning (Sleat, forthcoming, p. 6). According to Sleat,

At most we can say that the presence of significant interests in *p* being true generates a reasonable suspicion that a belief is the result of politically motivated reasoning. [...] The trouble here is that it really is quite indeterminate what, *if anything*, follows from having identified a belief as potentially biased.

(Sleat, forthcoming, p. 6)

Our inability to directly observe whether an individual's belief that LEG is the product of motivated reasoning—and, in more general terms, is the product of the social institution that the belief legitimizes—poses a problem for the realist ideology critic. In acknowledgement of this fact, I believe that the best way to conceive of RIC is as a heuristic device. On this view, RIC tells us what we as epistemic agents should do upon learning that your or someone else's belief is “likely to have been caused by” the very institution that it legitimates. This is an important amendment to standard accounts of RIC: rather than directly identifying epistemic flaws, RIC (on my reconstruction) looks for proxies for epistemically flawed beliefs and advises us on what we should do when we identify them.

My second point of refinement focuses on the role of motivated reasoning in accounts of RIC. Aytac and Rossi introduce motivated reasoning into their account of RIC to distinguish between *benign* and *malign* cases of epistemic

circularity in a bid to escape the conclusion that *all* epistemically circular beliefs are flawed.⁵ According to Aytac and Rossi, epistemically circular beliefs that legitimate the social practices that cause them become defective when combined with *motivated reasoning*: “to see why the self-justification of power leads to [...] malignant circularity, then, we must turn to what social psychologists call politically motivated reasoning” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 5).⁶

There are a range of possible ways to unpack why motivated reasoning might render an epistemically circular belief that LEG malignant. One possible rationale is that motivated reasoning is an anti-reliable belief-forming process; as Aytac and Rossi put it, motivated reasoning has a “tendency to generate false beliefs” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 6). If this is the case, then (under a reliabilist framework) beliefs generated by motivated reasoning are doxastically unjustified. However, this rationale relies on the empirical assumption that motivated reasoning is anti-reliable, which could turn out to be false. Another way to explain why motivated reasoning is epistemically problematic is that it fails to properly base an individual's belief, and *this* explains why the resulting belief is doxastically unjustified (Carter & McKenna, 2020). For example, suppose that Anika has good reasons to believe that gun control is effective at reducing crime. However, suppose further that “she is basing her belief on good reasons not because they are good reasons but, rather, primarily because of something epistemically irrelevant” (Carter & McKenna, 2020, p. 710)—say, because these good reasons correspond to Anika's own interests, since being in favor of gun control will make her popular among her peers. In this case, Anika's belief is not properly based. Aytac and Rossi seem to endorse this rationale when they acknowledge that “even if politically motivated reasoning was reliable, it would still lack justification in the sense that the relevant beliefs would not be properly based on the relevant reasons” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 6, footnote 12).

I do not wish to take a stance on what is the best explanation for why motivated reasoning renders epistemic circularity malignant (though it is important to flag this as a key choice-point). Rather, I want to offer two examples of beliefs which I take to be properly the targets of RIC but where motivated reasoning is absent. First, recall Rossi and Argenton's RIC critique of Nozickian-inspired beliefs in the legitimacy of the capitalist state. It is plausible in this example that legal reforms of land ownership caused the public over time to regard private property as the kind of entity which should intuitively be owned by individuals rather than a collective, without this belief having been formed via motivated reasoning. This is because laws themselves often have expressive effects which can influence people's beliefs. Here, then, is an example of epistemic circularity without motivated reasoning which Rossi and Argenton themselves regard as malignant.

Second, consider a multi-agent case such as that illustrated in Figure 2. Suppose that the more powerful social group A straightforwardly deceives the weaker social group B into believing that LEG, even though A knows LEG to be false. This is arguably still a case of epistemic circularity: B's belief that LEG is the result of A's testimony and is “caused” by the hierarchical social order insofar as this is why B takes A to be authoritative; this belief then buttresses the hierarchical social order in which A has power over B. Moreover, this epistemic circularity is malignant insofar as B is not justified in believing that LEG—for instance, because A intentionally indoctrinated B, and thus B's belief-forming process was unreliable. If this example holds, then we have another instance of malignant epistemic circularity without motivated reasoning. It's just that this is not very *interesting*; as Williams puts it, the Critical Theory Principle (on which RIC is loosely based: see footnote 3) “will certainly apply very forcibly to a society in which the story is not believed by the powerful party [...] In those examples, however, the coercive element is so blatant that one hardly needs the Critical Principle to make the point” (Williams, 2002, p. 222).

If either of these two examples hold, then an improved account of RIC must not assume that malignant epistemic circularity is *necessarily* caused nor explained by motivated reasoning. Instead, motivated reasoning may just be one mechanism among others that causes an individual to believe that LEG and explains what is epistemically wrong with self-justifying power.

4 | TWO HORNS OF A (FALSE) DILEMMA

Having offered a reconstruction of RIC, I will now present a challenge to it. Realist ideology critics seem to face a dilemma. Either their account of RIC makes deeply implausible epistemological assumptions, in which case it is

unconvincing, or they temper its epistemology, but at the expense of rendering RIC toothless. I will argue for each horn in turn before revealing the dilemma to be a false one by distinguishing between different possible strengths of RIC.

4.1 | Horn one: RIC Assumes a deeply implausible epistemology

Realist ideology critics often appear to endorse the following account of RIC:

Strong RIC: if you learn that one reason for your belief that a social institution or practice is legitimate is likely to have been caused by that very institution or practice, then you should abandon your belief.

For instance, Rossi writes that, “if a legitimization story isn't what it purports to be, it becomes epistemically suspicious and so should be *debunked*, and the practices it supports should be disposed of” (Rossi, 2019, p. 645). In a similar vein, Aytac and Rossi argue that, upon discovering that a cultural technê is epistemically unwarranted, we have “a conclusive reason to reject any such cultural technê” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 6). Elsewhere, Rossi writes that beliefs in the legitimacy of a social institution that are found to be epistemically flawed “ought to be rejected [...] because of their genealogy” (Rossi, 2024, p. 19). So common are these remarks that Sleat summarizes RIC as the view that “X is not justified in believing p where p has been produced or reproduced by the dominant group and through their power made it very difficult [sic] for p to be subjected to critical analysis” (Sleat, forthcoming, p. 5). Captured in a single phrase, Strong RIC says: “one strike, you're out!”

The obvious problem with Strong RIC is that it is simply not plausible that individuals are not justified in believing, and hence should abandon, their belief that p in light of the fact that one justification for their belief that p is defective. To see this, imagine the following case.⁷ Suppose Angela believes in anthropogenic climate change. Suppose that she has 100 doxastic justifiers of this belief, each of which refers to the testimony of a different climate scientist. Now suppose that Angela discovers that one of these climate scientists, John, is corrupt—that is, one of her doxastic justifiers is revealed to be epistemically suspect. Clearly, Angela should not give up her belief in anthropogenic climate change because of this discovery.⁸ Extrapolating from this case, we can see that Strong RIC rests on a deeply implausible epistemic norm that minimizes the chance of believing false propositions, but—as we saw with the example of Angela—at the expense of a high chance of rejecting true beliefs.

4.2 | Horn two: RIC is toothless

To avoid horn one, realist ideology critics may water down their epistemology as follows:

Weak RIC: if you learn that one reason for your belief that a social institution or practice is legitimate is likely to have been caused by that very institution or practice, and it is your sole justification for your belief, then you should abandon your belief; however, if you retain at least one epistemically untainted justification for your belief, you may continue to believe it with the same degree of confidence as before.

At times, realist ideology critics seem to endorse this weaker account of RIC. For instance, in their discussion of the Nozickian defense of the capitalist state, Rossi and Argenton concede that “libertarians who offer philosophically sophisticated defences of natural rights to private property—not to mention the many consequentialist or instrumental defenses of [individual private property]—remain untouched by our argument” (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1056). On neopatriarchy, Aytac and Rossi similarly concede that “subjects may have other reasons to endorse neopatriarchy

as a legitimate order” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 11). Weak RIC, then, merely excludes inadmissible evidence for your belief in the legitimacy of a social institution and does not necessarily tar the belief itself.

However, Weak RIC is toothless in any mildly realistic scenario. So long as an individual can offer “philosophically sophisticated defences” of their belief that are not causally traceable to the institution that their belief legitimizes, they can escape the bite of Weak RIC. For instance, as soon as the libertarian can point to a reason for their belief in the legitimacy of the capitalist state which does not rely on the intuitive appeal of private property rights, then the belief falls outside of the scope of RIC. This poses a serious and novel challenge to RIC since the entire *raison d'être* of RIC, and radical realism more broadly, was to develop a version of political realism that was not biased toward the status quo. Weak RIC fails in this crucial respect, since it is unable to challenge beliefs that buttress the status quo (such as beliefs in the legitimacy of the capitalist state and neopatriarchy in capitalist and neopatriarchal social orders, respectively) so long as people can point to another justification for their belief that is not malignantly epistemically circular. Thus, Weak RIC is a problem for realist ideology critics by their own lights.

In response, Aytac and Rossi could reply that, in practice, it is unlikely that most people could point to “philosophically sophisticated” justifications to back up their belief in the legitimacy of a social institution or practice. This is because many beliefs of this kind are held uncritically, with no justification other than mere defense to authority. If this is the case, the reply goes, then Weak RIC is not as toothless as I have made it out to be.⁹

However, I do not take this to be a convincing response, for two reasons. First, I would expect that most people *could* point to a reason for their belief that LEG other than mere deference to authority (note that the reason need not be philosophically sophisticated to evade Weak RIC). To think otherwise is to cast the general population as unwashed masses, which I take to be not only disrespectful but inaccurate. Of course, the reason given for an individual's belief that LEG would then have to be subjected to critical scrutiny to see if it stands up, but I would imagine that most people could at least provide a reason—rendering RIC as a mode of critique toothless.

Second, even if we grant that most people would not be able to provide any further reasons for their belief that LEG, Weak RIC *still* runs into the charge of toothlessness, albeit of a different kind. Instead of being unable to counsel the abandonment of any beliefs (rendering Weak RIC toothless in the original sense), Weak RIC *can* tell us to abandon certain beliefs—but only those which people hold solely because of their uncritical deference to authority. However, these beliefs are *already* epistemically suspect: we don't need any fancy theoretical machinery to tell us this. Thus, Weak RIC is toothless in the sense that it fails to tell us anything new and thus is a redundant mode of critique.

5 | MODERATE RIC AS A SOLUTION

As should now be apparent, RIC can differ in strength depending on its underlying epistemological assumptions. This fact has gone unnoticed in the literature and has resulted in a muddying of the debate whereby realist ideology critics appear to oscillate between Strong and Weak RIC, both of which carry unpalatable implications. To capture the fact that RIC can vary in strength, I propose the following reformulation of RIC:

If you learn that one reason for your belief that a social institution or practice is legitimate is likely to have been caused by that very institution or practice, then you should φ .

where φ denotes a (range of) permissible doxastic attitude(s).¹⁰

How one specifies φ will determine the strength of RIC. Indeed, the dilemma outlined in Section 4 illustrates a trade-off between plausible epistemological “inputs” and radical political “outputs” that arises when deciding how to specify φ . Framed in this way, we can now see a clear way out of this dilemma. What I call *Moderate* RIC sits at the sweet spot between these two extremes and specifies φ as “re-examine your other reasons for that belief and recalibrate your degree of confidence in it accordingly.” Moderate RIC seems to be what Sleat is getting at when he says that RIC “can only explain why people might be suspicious of certain beliefs, but suspicion does not equate to

lacking epistemic warrant in holding a belief" (Sleat, [forthcoming](#), p. 9), and that "at most what follows from the empirical conditions is that it should render the belief *suspicious*" (Sleat, [forthcoming](#), p. 5). My account of Moderate RIC builds on Sleat's suggestion that RIC should cast *doubt* on certain beliefs. It may turn out that Moderate RIC is not too dissimilar from Aytac's and Rossi's view, properly construed; nevertheless, it remains important to get clear on the menu of options available to the realist ideology critic.

Moderate RIC rests on a contamination story: when you discover that one reason for your belief that *p* is likely to be defective, this can rob you of other reasons for believing that *p*. Why might this be the case? Psychological studies suggest that when you believe that *p*, you are likely to acquaint yourself with evidence that supports your belief that *p* and ignore information that is inconsistent with your belief that *p* (confirmation bias) and process new information in a biased manner which confirms your belief that *p* (assimilation bias) (Hughes, 2023; Gilovich, 1993; Kunda, 1990; Mercier & Sperber, 2017; Taber & Lodge, 2016). Given this, upon discovering that one of your reasons for believing that *p* is likely to be epistemically flawed, your other justifications for that belief become suspicious since your believing that *p* has plausibly caused you to be inattentive to countervailing evidence and guilty of *ex post facto* rationalization. Moderate RIC specifically applies to cases in which the likely epistemic flaw in your belief-forming process is self-justifying power.

Unlike its stronger counterpart, Moderate RIC does not immediately conclude that a belief is doxastically unjustified upon discovering that a justification for the belief is likely to be malignantly epistemically circular. However, unlike its weaker cousin, Moderate RIC casts doubt on the belief itself, giving the believer reason to undertake what Yuval Avnir and Dion Scott-Kakures call "epistemic due diligence" (Avnir & Scott-Kakures, 2015, p. 26). The upshot is that Moderate RIC avoids the two pitfalls of an implausible epistemology and lacking critical bite, thus allowing the realist ideology critic to escape the dilemma.

To illustrate how Moderate RIC could be used by political theorists in practice, let me now offer an example from the history of political thought. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes:

The very fact that woman *is the Other* tends to cast suspicion upon all the justifications that men have ever been able to provide for it. These have all too evidently been dictated by men's interest. A little-known feminist of the seventeenth century, Poulain de la Barre, put it this way: "All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit."

(de Beauvoir, 2010, pp. 10–11)

With minimal reconstruction, we can interpret Beauvoir's argument as a paradigmatic example of Moderate RIC. Consider a hypothetical contemporary of Beauvoir—call her Marie—who believes that the subordination of women is legitimate. Suppose that one reason for her belief is a religious argument offered by the male elite that purports to show that the subordination of women is "willed in heaven" (de Beauvoir, 2010, p. 11). Beauvoir points out that the male elite are likely to hold false beliefs that justify their own power due to motivated reasoning (their justifications "have all too evidently been dictated by men's interest" [de Beauvoir, 2010, 10]). Moreover, these false beliefs are likely to then disseminate throughout society due to the male elite's powerful position in the social hierarchy (as Beauvoir notes, they are the "legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists" [de Beauvoir, 2010, p. 11]).

Upon reading this passage, Marie has good reason to suspect that the subordination of women is itself a *cause* of her religiously grounded justification for her belief that the subordination of women is legitimate. Consequently, Marie should "cast suspicion upon all the justifications that men have ever been able to provide for [the subordination of women]." There are two things of note here which mark Beauvoir's account as an instance of Moderate RIC. First, Beauvoir argues that there is good reason for Marie to be *suspicious* of her justifications for her belief that the subordination of women is legitimate—not that Marie should reject the belief outright (Strong RIC), nor that Marie should continue to believe it with the same confidence as before so long as she has other reasons for her belief (Weak RIC). Second, Beauvoir contends that Marie should re-evaluate *all* her justifications for the subordination of women, not just her religiously grounded justification. This is because Marie may be guilty of *ex post facto*

rationalization of her belief and, as Beauvoir points out, other justifications for the subordination of women given by the male elite are plausibly the result of motivated reasoning.

6 | OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

Thus far, I have revised the standard account of RIC to the following: if you discover that a reason for your belief that a social institution is legitimate is likely to have been caused by that very same institution, then you should φ . This charitable reconstruction makes clear that RIC can differ in strength depending on the underlying epistemological assumptions that in turn specify φ . I have then argued for Moderate RIC as the most plausible variant of RIC.

However, Moderate RIC is not out of the woods just yet. In this section, I sketch three objections.¹¹ First, one might complain that Moderate RIC simply states the obvious. *Of course*, people should be self-critical and question beliefs they hold that align with the interests of a powerful social group (be them a member of it or not). This is hardly a novel insight: several centuries ago, the 18th century philosopher David Hume cautioned that “all doctrines are to be suspected which are favoured by our passions” (Hume, 1985, p. 598). More recently, epistemologists have hailed the epistemic virtue of intellectual humility, understood as “appropriately attending to and owning one's cognitive limitations” (Turri et al., 2021). So, the complaint goes, Moderate RIC fails to tell us anything new. Call this the Triviality Objection.

There are two things to say in response. First, it is not the case that Moderate RIC is entirely redundant for an intellectually humble individual. Even intellectually humble individuals do not instinctively know which of their political beliefs require additional scrutiny; Moderate RIC can help in this regard. However, the actual process of *doing* Moderate RIC (or RIC of any strength, for that matter) requires effort and expertise—for example, Rossi and Argenton's critique of the Nozickian argument for the capitalist state required extensive knowledge of historical and anthropological evidence. Since self-justifying beliefs in the legitimacy of social orders are often not self-evident, undertaking Moderate RIC is far from a trivial exercise. Moreover, insofar as intellectual humility makes people particularly inclined to be deferent to others, Moderate RIC could also be useful in providing the humble person with an additional reason to be skeptical of justifications for the social order that are given by *others*.¹² Second, even if Moderate RIC were largely redundant for intellectually humble individuals, it nevertheless remains a useful heuristic in contexts where many people lack this epistemic virtue or improperly apply it, which is plausibly the case in many contemporary societies. Ultimately, though, we should strive for a society in which the epistemic norms that underpin Moderate RIC are so intuitive that spelling it out becomes superfluous.

Second, RIC seems vulnerable to the Self-Defeating Objection levelled by Amia Srinivasan, according to which genealogical debunking arguments are self-defeating because they rely on epistemic norms that can themselves be debunked (Srinivasan, 2015, 2019). As Srinivasan succinctly puts it,

One's judgments about the epistemological premises required by any plausible argument for genealogical scepticism—judgments about explanation, evidence, justification, defeat, methods, bootstrapping and so on—are presumably as shaped by background factors (one's culture, or the nature of extent of one's philosophical training) as the philosophical judgments that genealogical sceptics wish to impugn. If so, then genealogical scepticism faces the spectre of self-defeat.

(Srinivasan, 2015, p. 328)

This poses a problem for RIC insofar as it is a type of genealogical debunking argument. This seems plausible at first glance: RIC aims to debunk the belief “S is legitimate” by discovering that the origin of the belief is likely to be causally traceable to S. Indeed, Aytac and Rossi themselves conceive of RIC as “genealogical in the narrow sense that it focuses on the causal history of beliefs and other cultural technēs” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 2). Thus, one would expect the same problems that apply to genealogical debunking arguments more broadly to apply to RIC. For instance, recall that, on one view of the role of motivated reasoning, RIC is underpinned by a “reliabilist” epistemology (Rossi, 2024, p. 18):

put simply, self-justifying power is an unreliable belief-forming process. The Self-Defeating Objection would then seem to arise if the reliabilist epistemic norms on which realist ideology critics rely are themselves (at least partly) a causal product of the critics' particular context. Insofar as this renders these norms epistemically suspect, the critics' invocation of these norms to show that certain beliefs in the legitimacy of social practices are epistemically suspect is self-defeating.

However, the application of the Self-Defeating Objection to RIC is misguided. Whether a particular genealogical debunking argument is self-defeating depends on the details of the argument. Unlike global arguments for genealogical skepticism, RIC is a specific kind of debunking argument that homes in on the much narrower case of self-justifying power. It would thus not be self-defeating if realist ideology critics came to believe in a reliabilist epistemology due to their particular context (e.g., having studied under professors who endorsed reliabilism). Rather, it would be a problem for the realist ideology critic if it turned out that their views about what it takes for a belief to be justified were themselves the result of *self-justifying power*—for example, if a realist ideology critic came to believe in a reliabilist epistemology because their philosophy professor instilled this belief in them, which in turn buttressed the professor's authority.¹³ If this were the case, then their argument for RIC would be self-defeating. However, this is not particularly plausible. Thus, RIC is not vulnerable to the Self-Defeating Objection in the way that global arguments for genealogical skepticism are.

Third, theorists have complained that RIC “cannot *replace* practice, action-guiding norms” and “the very attempt to do political theory generally [...] in a way that abjures morality is misguided” (Erman & Möller, 2021, p. 5; Sleat, *forthcoming*, p. 1). Call this the Insufficiency Objection. However, these criticisms miss their target: RIC was never *intended* to supplant other ways of doing political theory. Aytac and Rossi grant that “insofar as definitive, action guiding condemnation of a social order is desirable, we envisage a division of labor between ideology critique and other branches of political theory,” a vision which the realist ideology critic Adrian Kreutz also shares (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 11; Rossi & Kreutz, 2022, p. 7). As Rossi and Argenton put it, “there is a role for genealogical ideology critique within normative political theory” (Rossi & Argenton, 2021, p. 1058). It is to the precise nature of this role that I now turn.

7 | DIVISION OF LABOR

What would this division of labor look like? In his discussion of RIC, Rossi uses the analogy of chipping away at a sculpture riddled with flaws (Rossi, 2019, pp. 646–649). Extending this analogy, a hybrid methodological approach to political theory could see normative political theorists carving out sculptures depicting a better world,¹⁴ while realist ideology critics cast a light on and hammer away at their defects. RIC could serve a dual purpose in actively critiquing other political theories (as demonstrated by Rossi and Argenton's RIC of Nozickian defenses of the capitalist state) and reminding theorists to be more intellectually humble about their own beliefs. Moderate RIC, which involves subjecting self-justifying beliefs to further epistemic testing and recalibrating one's confidence in these beliefs accordingly, would slot very naturally into political theorists' methodological toolkit.

While there is near-unanimous agreement that RIC must be supplemented with normative theory,¹⁵ it remains an open question as to *how much* supplementation is required. In this section, I want to suggest that a significant amount is required; I motivate this by offering a reason to be skeptical about realist ideology critics' ability to establish an asymmetry between beliefs in the legitimacy of fascist and egalitarian societies using epistemology alone.

One might worry that RIC of any strength condemns *all* stable social orders, and thus is a futile mode of critique; to use a simple analogy, RIC is like a weedkiller that kills weeds and blooming flowers alike. Sleat touches on this concern when he cautions that “on RIC's terms, belief in the ideologies supporting all hierarchical orders will be deemed epistemically unwarranted simply by virtue of justifying a hierarchal order” (Sleat, *forthcoming*, p. 6). However, we can press Sleat's concern even further: it is plausible that even an *egalitarian* society's social institutions and practices, such as its schools and parenting norms, must inculcate an egalitarian ethos among its members to ensure its stability. In such a society, citizens' beliefs in the legitimacy of an egalitarian society will at least in part be caused by

its very existence. As an instance of self-justifying power, RIC must condemn this belief-forming process, with the implication that RIC is unable to make distinctions between stable regimes of differing value. Anticipating this objection, Aytac and Rossi respond that,

Particularly hierarchical forms of cultural reproduction are likely to exceed what is needed for a functioning social order, where function is understood in terms of ensuring long-term stability and social cooperation without reference to moral concepts such as rights or fairness [...] all else being equal, the more hierarchical a social structure, the higher the chance of surpassing the baseline.

(Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 10)

In this passage, Aytac and Rossi qualify the scope of RIC so that it only critiques self-stabilizing societies that exceed some baseline necessary for stability. They then claim that this is much more likely to occur in hierarchical societies than egalitarian ones, since hierarchy shields the motivated reasoning of the powerful from contestation. As a result, RIC provides an epistemic defense of egalitarianism and “*pro tanto* counsels rather flat social structures” (Rossi, 2023, p. 6).

However, this response is not enough to get realist ideology critics off the hook. Suppose we grant (in line with Aytac and Rossi) that the probability of a society exceeding the baseline conditional on it being hierarchical is higher than the probability of a society exceeding the baseline conditional on it being egalitarian. Nevertheless, this fact has no bearing on the likelihood of an egalitarian society exceeding the baseline, and importantly does not entail that an egalitarian society is *unlikely* to exceed the baseline. To use a simple example: adult moose are more likely than adult humans to be over 5 feet tall; nevertheless, both are very likely to be over 5 feet tall. Let's suppose that egalitarian societies are also likely to exceed the baseline (albeit less frequently than hierarchical ones). Realist ideology critics must criticize egalitarian societies that exceed the baseline on the same grounds as they criticize hierarchical societies that exceed the baseline; insofar as RIC should be able to stand up on its own as a mode of critique, this looks like a bug of the approach.

This takes us to the heart of what we take to be the task of RIC. If the task of RIC is simply to serve as a heuristic device that identifies likely epistemic flaws in individuals' beliefs (as I suggest in Section 3), then it becomes a feature rather than a bug that, according to RIC, citizens of stable egalitarian and fascist societies alike should equally question legitimization stories that are self-justifying. To break the troubling symmetry in realist ideology critics' treatment of egalitarian and fascist social orders, we must turn to normative theory to then assess the relative strength of arguments for each social arrangement. RIC's value is simply in pointing out that some beliefs (in particular, self-justifying legitimization stories) should be scrutinized at a higher standard than others.

8 | CONCLUSION

Political theory is having a self-reflexive moment. This is evident from recent methodological debates about ideal and non-ideal theory, political realism, ideology critique, genealogical debunking, and more. As we can see in the case of RIC, these approaches are sometimes mischaracterized as standing in a necessarily antagonistic relationship. Against this, I have proposed Moderate RIC as a plausible version of RIC which could be used as a heuristic tool to help identify potentially epistemically defective beliefs which should be subjected to further epistemic testing. I have suggested that Moderate RIC would need to be supplemented with a significant amount of normative theory to yield meaningful insights.

While RIC could be done alongside normative theorizing in principle, the jury is still out on whether such a division of labor would prove fruitful in practice. It may be, for instance, that the amount of social scientific evidence needed to establish the causal links that RIC relies upon would make this division of labor inadvisable. Experimenting with a hybrid methodological approach of this kind is worth exploring in future research.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Fleeting critiques of RIC can be found in Erman and Möller (2021, pp. 5–6), Favara (2021, pp. 335–336), Leader Maynard (2022, p. 457, footnote 13), Ulaş (2023, pp. 546–548). For responses, see Cross (2022, 2023). The first and (to my knowledge, only) article solely dedicated to critiquing the RIC project is Sleat (forthcoming).
- ² In line with early accounts of RIC (Prinz & Rossi, 2017; Rossi, 2019), I take the primary unit of analysis to be *beliefs*. In their recent article, Aytac and Rossi shift the unit of analysis to “cultural technēs” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 2); however, I concur with Sleat that “all the examples they use and discuss tend to be straightforwardly about beliefs,” and hence it is best to focus on beliefs “for the sake of not adding an unnecessary layer of terminological complexity” (Sleat, forthcoming, p. 4, footnote 6).
- ³ RIC was initially developed by Rossi and Prinz to resolve a problem that they saw within Williams’ realism, namely that Williams was guilty of a “lapse back into moralism” (Prinz & Rossi, 2017, p. 355). According to Williams, when the Critical Theory Principle is not met, “the system is unjust because the supposed legitimization of it is accepted by the disadvantaged only because of coercion”; for this reason, he refers to it as a “test of injustice” (Williams, 2002, p. 221). Prinz and Rossi argue that “Williams’ morally charged assessment [...] succeeds at the price of relying a moralized definition of politics,” and hence fails to be “true to realism” (Prinz & Rossi, 2017, p. 355). Unlike Williams’ Critical Theory Principle, realist ideology critics couch the problem at hand as an *epistemic* defect rather than a *moral* one.
- ⁴ This hypothetical scenario is presented by Aytac and Rossi (2022, p. 6).
- ⁵ We might be tempted to say that *all* epistemically circular beliefs are flawed. However, this is a rather big bullet to bite, since it would mean that there is no persuasive argument for (say) using your memory to conclude that your memory is reliable. To allow for this possibility, Michael Bergmann distinguishes between *benign* and *malign* cases of epistemic circularity, a distinction which Aytac and Rossi adopt (Bergmann, 2004). Of course, some epistemologists are happy to bite that bullet, and have mounted objections to reliabilism on precisely these grounds (Fumerton, 1995; Vogel, 2000).
- ⁶ Put another way, RIC targets beliefs which have a “justificatory deficit caused by the *interaction* of motivated reasoning and circularity” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 5 [italics added]).
- ⁷ I am grateful to Rachel Fraser for suggesting this example to me.
- ⁸ That is not to say that Angela should do *nothing* differently. As I will argue in Section 5, Angela should nevertheless review her other justifications for her belief in anthropogenic climate change as she may be guilty of confirmation and assimilation bias.
- ⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possible response from Aytac and Rossi. Thanks also to an anonymous BPhil examiner for pressing me on a similar point.
- ¹⁰ I define φ as “a (range of) permissible doxastic attitude(s)” so that RIC can accommodate permissivism. This is the view that rational individuals can sometimes adopt different doxastic attitudes to a given piece of evidence (Schoenfield, 2014, p. 194). In current accounts of RIC, it is not obvious that RIC does leave room for permissivism. For instance, Rossi regards RIC as “the most epistemically cautious default position,” and Rossi and his coauthors frequently invoke notions of “epistemic recklessness” and being “epistemically unwise” to assert the plausibility of RIC (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 5; Rossi, 2019, p. 645; Rossi, 2024, p. 22). In doing so, they presuppose that being epistemically cautious is the only rational position to adopt and fail to acknowledge the possibility that people can rationally hold different attitudes toward epistemic risks. Luckily for realist ideology critics, this is not a necessary feature of RIC. RIC can accommodate weak permissivism (where a rational individual may judge that the belief that p is true with a credence within a small range upon discovering that their belief is epistemically defective) while retaining critical force.
- ¹¹ By no means do I take these objections to exhaust possible critiques of RIC. For instance, Luke Ulaş has recently criticized RIC on the grounds that it is unlikely to persuade most people to revise their beliefs (Ulaş, 2023, pp. 20–21). Moreover, even if RIC does prove persuasive, it is likely to be insufficient for motivating political action. As Kirun Sankaran puts it, “the *meliorative* project of ideology critique is guilty of excessive rationalism [...] [ideology critics] systematically ignore the role strategic considerations play in driving and preventing social change” (Sankaran, 2020, pp. 1448–1449).

Sankaran uses this argument against Aytac and Rossi's chief interlocutors—the New Ideology Critics—but ironically it also applies to RIC.

¹² Thanks to Rachel Fraser for raising this point.

¹³ This example loosely draws on a student–teacher analogy used by Aytac and Rossi (2022, p. 2).

¹⁴ Ben Cross envisions a more circumscribed role for the normative political theorist in this division of labor. Rather than telling political actors what they “ought to do,” Cross argues that normative political theorists should merely aim to “resourc[e] the deliberation of political actors,” for instance by “draw[ing] attention to obstacles in the way of certain options” (Cross, 2023, pp. 4, 6).

¹⁵ A brief note on my terminology. I use “normative theory” here as a shorthand to refer to both prescriptive and evaluative theories that take *morality* as their source of normativity. By contrasting RIC with normative theory, I am not claiming that RIC eschews *any* normativity—to the contrary, RIC is underpinned by epistemic normativity. Moreover, I do not mean to imply that ideology critique *in general* cannot be an instance of normative theory in this sense; indeed, Aytac and Rossi oppose Sally Haslanger's proposed mode of ideology critique precisely due to its “reliance on morality as a source of normativity” (Aytac & Rossi, 2022, p. 3).

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